

REFLECTIONS ON *Growth* Number 13, August 2006

“God loveth those who are working in His path in groups”— The Learning About Teaching Teams

When we turn to the experience of those clusters where intensive programs of growth have been launched, we see that an important element of that framework has been the mobilization of teaching teams during the expansion phase. Many believers have brought to this phase their experience from participating in home-visit teams as part of the practice component of Ruhi Institute Book 2 or in teaching teams that were formed at the end of Book 6. Although teams making home visits to share deepening themes with new believers frequently encounter other family members who can be taught the Faith, the teaching teams described in the stories in this newsletter have been especially formed for sharing the Message of Bahá'u'lláh with seekers.

In some clusters teaching teams were initially viewed as synonymous with “street teaching” teams, often because of a lack of clarity regarding the term “direct teaching.” Shoghi Effendi explained that direct teaching consists of “an open and bold assertion of the fundamental verities of the Cause.” This can be done individually or in groups and does not depend on the setting. Street teaching may be one method but there are many other approaches. The concept of teaching teams that has evolved over the past few years can more accurately be understood as a support group, a few friends who come together during an intensive program of growth for planning, consultation, inspiration, and systematic action. Their teaching work may go on individually, in pairs, or in larger groups, but they meet regularly to consult on the progress of their personal and collective plans.

From the accounts below it is apparent that the members of teaching teams receive encouragement and gain strength from one another. They pray together, exchange experiences, assess their learning, practice the skills acquired in the institute courses, and thereby attract confirmations. Teaching teams are a direct response to the concern expressed in the following quotation from the Universal House of Justice:

While the friends are generally conscious of the vital importance of teaching, yet, because of their frailties, many for the most part lack confidence, and feel they do not know what course of action to follow, or how to bring their efforts to a conclusion.

The learning demonstrates that when teams stay together for two or three cycles of a growth program, they become more systematic and gradually reap greater results. They maintain records of the contacts made, their visits, their teaching efforts, the results, and the follow-up. The needs and interests of every seeker or guest are considered in order to determine what the best approach is for that individual and who is the most suitable person to carry it out. Above all, the focus is not just on inviting people to activities but in learning how to elevate a conversation toward spiritual themes and in finding opportunities, daily, to share the Revelation of God for this day.

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Forming Teaching Teams

It is not necessary to complete the sequence of courses before joining a team. These small teaching groups allow people to work closely with those who share common interests, culture, language, or the like. The main prerequisite is a desire to share the Message of Bahá'u'lláh with others. Following are some accounts of what has been learned about forming teams and preparing them to be effective for the expansion and consolidation phases of a growth program.

Malaysia. In the initial cycles of the intensive program of growth, teaching teams were formed on an ad hoc basis normally at the reflection meeting. However, systematic follow-up proved difficult during the consolidation phase. This led to thoughts that teams had to be more structured. It was observed that the teaching teams with members from the same neighborhood, who could hold core activities with neighbors, were more effective and sustainable than the ad hoc ones. Below is the experience of one team.

In a locality in Kuala Lumpur, a group of three housewives initially formed a teaching team to visit contacts during the day while their husbands and children were away. They were visiting acquaintances in the locality but not necessarily focusing on any particular neighborhood. They found this occasional random visit hard to follow up on. After reflection, they decided to focus on one condominium where one of them lived. They then invited others who lived near this condominium, including the husbands and children, to join the team. They also decided to focus on junior youth and devotional meetings. As a result, a junior youth gathering with 11 participants was initiated. At their last devotional meeting, 20 people from the neighborhood attended the gathering.

Senegal. A teaching team in **Dakar** is made up of four individuals: a married couple, who hosts core activities (devotional gatherings and study circles) because their house is better suited for meetings, and two single males. The members carry out their activities individually, or in pairs, because each member has a different timetable.

One of our members looks out for receptive souls among his friends and colleagues. He invited a friend to the devotional gathering our team organizes. That person came several times and then joined a Ruhi Institute Book 1 study circle. Having completed Book 1, he showed interest in studying Book 4. Now this seeker himself has started to teach the Faith and brought a friend to our devotional gathering.

A member of our team is from the Joola tribe, which has traditionally been very receptive to the Faith. He, accompanied by another member of our team, started home visits to one of his long time acquaintances, also a Joola. The latter showed a very open mind and willingly joined a Book 1 study circle and started attending our devotional gathering.

The last two members of our team, the couple, also teach their friends and acquaintances, usually inviting them to the devotional gathering as a first introduction to the Faith. Receptive souls are then invited to the study circles, sometimes after having been invited to a fireside, which is an opportunity to give them “Anna’s” presentation.

Working as a team increases considerably the effectiveness of our teaching efforts, and widens their scope. It also results in bringing together seekers from various backgrounds, who enjoy studying together Ruhi Institute books and benefiting from one another’s insights.

United States. The Area Teaching Committee in **Seattle, Washington**, found that “allowing people the flexibility to choose their own teaching teams and target population creates a sense of ownership of the process. This process may take longer to implement, coordinate, and track, but it encourages creativity and inspires the ‘spirit of enterprise’.”

Sustaining Teaching Teams

Some teams are formed during a reflection meeting for the purpose of the expansion phase. Others have grown out of study circles when friends formed teams to do the practice component of Book 6 and then continued together during the intensive program of growth. In either case, experience has shown that it is beneficial for the team to stay together to coordinate their efforts during the consolidation phase. In many instances the learning has been enhanced when a teaching team has worked together for a sustained period of time, building up contacts and experiences that make them increasingly effective.

England. The story that follows gives a sense of the effectiveness a teaching team in **Sussex** has gained by working together for more than a year.

Our team in Brighton and Hove have been meeting every fortnight to consult and reflect on our progress since forming about a year ago. As individuals, we are of an upper age group of Bahá'ís and have an advantage of free time during the day. At various times we have been assisted by our Auxiliary Board member and a member of our Area Teaching Committee. We have regular contact with one another between meetings, at a weekly deepening evening and devotionals at our Bahá'í Centre, and three of us are co-tutoring a study circle. All of our team have studied the sequence of courses through Book 7.

Although we perhaps lack the energy and sprightliness of the younger souls in the community, we *can* offer the qualities of determination and perseverance, which have resulted in one declaration and three entries into a study circle. It has been exciting and joyous to welcome and meet with these new participants. It is truly marvelous in this Faith to really learn the essentials of living and loving, of “being and doing.”

Australia. A teaching team in **Brisbane** developed its initial experiences in teaching by nurturing the interest of people who telephoned the directory number for the Brisbane community inquiring about the Faith. This gave them confidence in teaching and helped them start a Book 1 group which formed the nucleus of their current community of interest. Since then, the team members have used each cycle of the growth program to add to the range and depth of their work, drawing not only on skills gained through the institute courses but also on their different temperaments and interests.

In cycle 1 we began having devotional gatherings in addition to our Book 1 group (one person declared). In cycle 2 we started a second Book 1 with seekers (two of whom declared). In cycle 3 we will be beginning a third Book 1 group, junior youth groups, and will take our existing community of interest, who have completed Book 1 and not yet enrolled, through to Book 4.

In keeping our team small, we have all been critically engaged with the learning process related to teaching. For instance, we realized that many from our community of interest did not deeply associate with the idea of a “divine educator” and had real difficulties with

“organized faith.” To respond to this issue, we developed a short, facilitated addition to Book 1 to support the journey of these friends through these two additional introductory ideas.

Given the long association among the members of our teams, we now use both the expansion and consolidation periods of the cycles of growth to add to our community of interest. We have also started to use the intensive period to push our team into doing new things that contribute to our teaching work. For instance, we are doing home visits to parents in the community of interest and discussing with them our junior youth programs, with the aim of starting groups during the consolidation phase of our cycle. We hope this will also create teaching opportunities for our team. The encouragement we give to one another motivates and sustains us through the more challenging and intensive phases of our work.

Planning and Consulting As a Team

The friends are gaining experience in how to work together as a team in planning and implementation. In the accounts that follow, teaching team members in two very different settings consult on how to increase their effectiveness.

Canada. A teaching team in **Vancouver** met in order to come up with a plan of action for the next three weeks.

We used the handout from the reflection meeting to list all the seekers our team will focus on and briefly discussed what we thought we could do to bring each person towards Bahá'u'lláh. We consulted and decided on a specific line of action for each individual over the next three weeks. Our discussions led us to two main realizations:

1. All of our seeking friends need to be invited to Book 1, if they are not already attending.
2. Every one of them needs to receive a home visit!

Our team decided to liberally use the home visit as a tool for the next three weeks. We have confidence that home visits are able to create profound spiritual encounters that will help move people closer to Bahá'u'lláh. For these three weeks of intensive teaching, we have 10 home visits planned. Some home visits will be to share stories about the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh from Book 4. Others will be on deepening themes from Book 2, such as the Covenant. A few will be to share a prayer and to invite the individual to join a Book 1 study circle.

One strategy we will also be employing is to invite new believers to come along with us on home visits. This will give those individuals an opportunity to teach and develop the skills and capacities they have acquired in institute courses. Finally, we will be relying on prayer to guide our efforts, and we will be praying daily for each seeker.

Cambodia. In the highly receptive cluster of **Battambang**, the growth committee, together with the institute coordinators, decided to train the believers to use a teaching booklet, “Let’s Know the Bahá’í Faith.” As this teaching booklet was compatible with “Anna’s” presentation in Book 6, it was easy to incorporate it into a practical exercise of Book 6 study circles. For the many friends who had completed Book 6 before the introduction of this teaching practice, training was scheduled on the first day of the expansion phase. Before going out to teach, the friends used role playing to teach their partners using the booklet.

Since teaching teams formed on a village basis had proven more effective and sustainable, the friends were encouraged to form teams in their villages, including at least one person who had completed Book 7. Then the teams spread out to teach in their areas. Upon their return each day, the teams consulted on questions from the field and referred to the relevant pages in the teaching booklet for appropriate answers. In this way, the team members became more familiar with the concepts they had studied in Book 6 and their confidence grew. As a result, the number of enrollments correspondingly increased from 100 in each cycle to 436 in the last expansion phase.

Teams Improve the Effectiveness of Our Teaching Efforts

Often it happens that a seeker needs to learn about the Faith through a variety of people and sources in order to become a confirmed believer. One teacher alone may not be able to answer all questions or meet all the needs of the seeker. Also, those inexperienced in teaching the Faith or who lack confidence can benefit from teaching side by side with a veteran teacher.

Burkina Faso. The friends in the teaching teams in the **Kadiogo** cluster reported that if they took one step on the path of teaching, they would encounter souls that at first glance they would not have thought would be receptive.

Being part of a group gives one courage to do what one has never done before. During the second teaching cycle in our cluster, when we met for the first time, we noticed that we had exhausted our social circle and so we decided to create a new one. A couple in our team approached a group of youth that met each night for tea just next door to their home. As it turned out, the six youth were very touched and happy to participate in the next fireside and in a devotional gathering that is held at the couple's home. By and by, the idea of starting a study circle took shape and now two of the youth are regularly taking part in this study circle.

Australia. The recollection below from a member of a teaching team in **Brisbane** demonstrates how working in teams enhances our teaching efforts.

“Mary” is my housemate. During previous discussions about the process of becoming a Bahá'í, Mary told me that she did not yet feel she knew enough to declare and become a Bahá'í. I suggested books and also suggested we have weekly deepenings together. She had been reading *The Reality of Man* and *Century of Light* and we often discussed the Writings together after our little devotionals and, of course, during our Book 1 sessions. Throughout all this, however, Mary was often quietly listening but didn't usually actively engage in the discussions and it was difficult to tell what she thought of it all.

Our teaching team decided at one of our meetings prior to the start of the intensive program of growth to ask Mary to come to a morning tea in order to invite her to join the Faith. I was dubious that she would accept because of her previous statements to me, but thought it would be a good learning experience and might assist moving her another step towards Bahá'u'lláh.

At the morning tea, a member of our team and Mary spent a bit of time talking and I played with their two-year old child at a different table. I couldn't hear what they said but as we were leaving, our team member said to me, “I think she is ready to sign.” I dismissed this as his excitement over a good discussion and didn't think further about it.

The next night we had our weekly study circle. As it happened, no one showed up except my neighbor, a member of our teaching team, Mary, and me. After catching up and socializing, my teammate decided to go home since it seemed that no one else would be coming. At this stage Mary piped up, “Before you go I want to make an announcement!” She told us that she decided to register as a Bahá’í! I can’t describe my surprise! It was such a beautiful moment and Mary was just radiant. My teammate happened to have a declaration card with him and she signed it on the spot. We further discussed the process of becoming a Bahá’í—she is looking forward to meeting the Local Spiritual Assembly! I think my neighbor had an interesting night, too—witnessing it all!

Anyway, after everyone left, we were talking and I asked Mary what had changed her mind about becoming a Bahá’í. She said her conversation with my teammate on the day before really changed her mind. She told me he said that she didn’t need to know everything about the Faith before declaring; that it was a matter of believing it is the truth. This was a very good lesson for me!

I feel so fortunate to live with her and to be able to walk with her during this stage of her journey and am so, so grateful to have team members who are more experienced than myself and from whom our seekers can gain different insights.

Teaching Teams Make Progress When the Focus Is on Learning

When teaching teams take the time to reflect on their experience and identify the lessons learned, their efforts meet with greater success.

Kenya. In the early cycles of the intensive program of growth in the **Tiriki West** cluster, teaching teams were formed for the expansion phase but dissolved after the period of intensive teaching ended. During the consolidation phase, the follow-up work was left to the cluster triad—the Auxiliary Board member, the institute coordinators, and the Cluster Growth Committee. Some lessons were learned from this experience and influenced the implementation of subsequent cycles:

1. Forming teams of individuals who live far from one another makes it difficult to have meetings to monitor and evaluate the progress of the teaching.
2. The consolidation phase is not so effective when the team members are not involved and the follow-up work falls on the shoulders of others.
3. The contacts made during the expansion phase do not feel as comfortable with the new group of people who interact with them for consolidation as with the friends who introduced the Faith to them, so they drop out of the process.

Based on this analysis, the cluster agencies in Tiriki West made changes in the approach and two teams were formed with these points in mind.

[We] resolved that a good team must have all the human resources needed like teachers, tutors, and animators. The teams must consist of people who are comfortable with one another. When they teach their relatives, neighbors, or friends, the same team must do the consolidation and meet regularly to make sure that the new believers and those brought into core activities are well attended to within the framework of the period set.

The success of these two teaching teams inspired the other teams. They now meet more regularly to reflect, make adjustments, and maintain focus in achieving their goals. The teams pray every day and report that “an outstanding strength comes from reliance and continuous supplication to the Almighty God to prepare the souls.”

Canada. The **Vancouver/UBC** cluster was the first in North America to have an intensive program of growth and now has seasoned teaching teams. In the illuminating first-hand account that follows, one team shares the many lessons it has learned as it has grown in its understanding of the “coherent model for growth” and in striving toward sustainability.

Our teaching team has been learning how to follow a pattern of consultation, action, and reflection through each of our cluster’s past five cycles. After the last reflection meeting, for example, our team gathered together and made a list of the seekers that we would focus on during the expansion phase to bring closer to Bahá’u’lláh. We reflected, as is our usual pattern, on where each individual was at and what would be the logical next step in their path: if they were not attending a devotional meeting, how would we make it easy for them to come? If they were already attending a devotional, how could we get them into Book 1? Who would we home visit? And, if they were already in the institute process, how were we going to help confirm them in the Faith? We made appropriate lines of action for each individual and the team divided the tasks to be done.

One line of action that we arranged as a team was to undertake Book 4 home visits (sharing stories of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh) to seekers participating in Book 1—we had many seekers in Book 1 to visit as we had already learned as a team how to effectively invite many of our friends to study circles. In one instance, the stories noticeably touched the hearts of the three friends that were visited. After sharing the stories, each of the seekers affirmed their belief in Bahá’u’lláh’s mission and spoke of Him in such moving terms that it is impossible to describe. The intimate setting of the home visits allows for profound spiritual encounters.

A few days after one of these visits, a newly confirmed believer wrote in an email: “Thank you for your story of Bahá’í history! You have given me the torch, and it has ignited my heart. I’m deeply moved by Bahá’í and the great truth of Bahá’í. I know I must learn more about the truth and Faith which Bahá’u’lláh has showed us, but now I’m feeling warmer, happier, and stronger, and my heart is much closer to you.” This same friend is now continuing through the sequence and inviting whomever he can to our team’s devotional meeting and study circles.

The almost daily reflection that occurs within the context of our teaching teams and the focus on the needs of the seeker and the new believer have fostered the organic development of a pattern of community life for the population our teaching team interacts with. We like to say that we are establishing a “spiritual ecosystem” because we are gradually learning how to develop that pattern of life and growth that is embedded in the institute process (the “framework”) within a sphere of seekers and a community of friends.

It was encouraging to think that each week members of our small teaching team (four in total) coordinate their efforts with one another and participate in weekly service and “portal” activities that widen our circle of friends in meaningful contexts, through weekly devotional gatherings and Book 1 study circles with seekers, and weekly home visits. This didn’t happen in one cycle, but with each new cycle, another component of that pattern has been added.

Without a small team of dedicated souls we would not be able to individually establish multiple weekly activities that serve the same population. We are learning together that our activities—the pattern of community life that we are building for ourselves and our friends—has to have a weekly rhythm. We are learning that our team will not advance if many of us are not active tutors—the skills and the capacities of the tutor are essential to our success. We are learning together that our collective and individual efforts should revolve around deepening friendships with the community of interest, tailoring core activities to them, and carrying out the practices associated with each institute course. Finally, we are learning that we love to learn and act together.

The Power of Divine Assistance

There are a growing number of inspiring stories that tell of how teaching teams received divine assistance after prayer and united action.

Ireland. A believer in **Limerick** recounts how quickly assistance from the heavenly Concourse can reach us.

My teaching partner and I were sitting in my car in the hotel car park during the reflection meeting at the launch of the intensive program of growth, taking a little quiet time to work on our teaching plan. She mentioned a woman we had both known some time back, and we decided that we would try to renew contact with this woman and visit her. As we got out of the car to go back into the meeting, who should we find standing beside the car but the woman we had just spoken of! She was so pleased to see us and asked us to come and visit her soon.

The institute coordinator in Ireland made the following observations after the **Dublin** community had begun to field teaching teams.

I noticed that teams which kept a simple focus of, for example, a prayer list, which connected them to particular teaching possibilities within their own life's context, seemed to have more success with acts of teaching and inviting. The overall experience of this expansion phase, as attested by story after story, is that the team members seemed to witness the power of divine assistance in their lives, which bolstered them to take more courageous steps forward. The consolidation phase is now devoted to working with the teams to consolidate the specific victories and aspirations of the teaching outreach phase.

Another story from **Dublin** illustrates how Bahá'u'lláh opens doors for our teaching when we make efforts for Him.

Our teaching team met on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday of each week to say prayers. I didn't know what to expect from the project but found that situations came up all around me where I had the opportunity to talk about the Faith, in work with my colleagues and at home with my neighbors. I've had about two opportunities like that over the years and in this two-week period I have had about 10! I was saying to myself, "Where is it all coming from?" and then I realized that I was in an accelerated state of teaching and that I was attracting people to me by being more open to them. One funny thing that happened was that I have been trying to introduce myself to my neighbors since I moved in years ago. I would always say "hello" to any neighbor I met. One day I was in the lift and I didn't say hello, but my neighbor did. He had a pizza in his hand and invited me to share his pizza with him. I almost automatically

said “no” but realized that I was supposed to be teaching and quickly accepted. I had pizza with him and his Iranian flatmate. We had a great chat and we agreed to meet up again.

Insights from Around the World

Following are brief comments from believers in different parts of the world who are sharing the learning about teaching teams that has helped them to advance the process of entry by troops.

Changing old modes of thinking

“Many veteran believers had come to think of teaching as something one schedules like other activities and that it was best done some distance from one’s residence—preferably among strangers. So everyone was reminded that teaching isn’t just something to do when everything else in one’s life is done, but teaching should be knit into every part of one’s daily activities.”

“It was observed that many of the long-time believers were so conditioned from years of rejection when teaching in the past that they no longer expected anyone to be receptive to Bahá’u’lláh’s Teachings. But it was also noticed that those who had completed the full sequence of courses were less likely to have retained this attitude, so it proved helpful to have at least one Book 7 graduate on each team.”

“In this cycle, we were much more realistic and pragmatic about what could be achieved. We didn’t build unrealistic expectations, and so were not disappointed. Also, we achieved the goals that we set out to achieve. This is different from the last cycles where grandiose plans were made, and disappointingly (but not surprisingly) not fulfilled.”

Formation of teams

“Before the launch of the intensive program of growth, it was apparent that even though many believers were trained, few were mobilized. So the Area Teaching Committee and cluster coordinator set about to telephone a number of the believers in advance of the reflection meeting to encourage them to join a teaching team. The reflection meeting itself further reinforced the prior appeals by inspiring and exciting the believers.”

“We are learning that teams should not be too large; otherwise, it becomes too difficult to meet and plan activities. However, teams should invite others to join, if they are not confident to form their own team. In due course, as the team grows in experience and size, it should split into two teams and continue the process.”

“We have understood each other’s strengths and interests. We have realized that one of us was very good at making contacts and assessing their readiness to join core activities. Another member enjoyed consolidation and relationship building. A third member enjoyed moving our team into new areas of our community’s core activities. Our team now distributes its workload to cope with the strengths of each individual.”

Focus on teaching

“Teams that maintained a clear focus on individuals that they were going to reach out to on every day of the intensive phase, along with a schedule of teaching activities, were able to maintain momentum.”

“There are many ways for teams to engage in teaching activities; it is important to identify team members’ current activities and draw the connection to possible teaching opportunities.”

“The friends also needed gentle reminders that they needn’t wait for other team members to be with them in order to share the Message; they could still use their individual initiative.”

“Teaching teams are given orientation training. This helps the teams to be better focused and feel a sense of ownership of the process. They are encouraged to view teaching as long-term relationship building rather than a single encounter or event.”

The need to “accompany” the teams and each other

“The focus of this cycle for the Cluster Growth Committee (CGC), Area Coordinators, and Auxiliary Board members has been to walk closely with teaching teams in order to share in learning, build confidence, and provide encouragement. All teaching teams were paired with individual members of the CGC, with Area Coordinators, and Board members for all to learn together and help raise more effective teaching teams.”

“In instances where individual members of the triad at the cluster level kept in close contact during the intensive phase, learning was disseminated and put into practice immediately in the field with fruitful results.”

Blessings descend upon the teams

“The thing I learned is about the power of the team. That team approach really systematized the teaching process for me. At occasions when my energy was really flagging and I was very discouraged, through the process of reading the Writings with my team members my energy was renewed.”

“During the intensive phase, teams focused on the ability to identify receptive souls; this was achieved through profound daily devotions and a focus to maintain a prayerful state.”

“Once the teams began to put forth efforts, they quickly discovered the joy that comes from Divine confirmations, which gave them added impetus and courage. With success, their enthusiasm inspired others to participate.”